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ABSTRACT

The Workers' Educational Association (WEA) developed a series of recommendations in response to the British government consultation paper "The Learning Age: A Renaissance for a New Britain." The recommendations addressed the following areas: individual learning revolution; investing in learning; learning at work; realizing the learning age; ensuring standards, quality, and accountability; and recognizing achievement. Specific recommendations to Britain's government included the following: support and encourage participation and contribution of voluntary sector and community-based organizations in the University for Industry's service provision; strengthen the funding base for community and related provision for adult learners; end discrimination against older learners operating in current public funding practices; support trade unions' role and contribution in development of workplace learning; issue a code of good practice in workplace learning; require educational guidance and careers services and the University for Industry to develop appropriate advice, guidance, and support systems to meet adult learners' needs; establish direct funding arrangements for training of part-time and full-time teachers of adults; commission comparative research to identify the benefits and added value to individuals and society of all forms of postcompulsory education and training; and develop a credit accumulation and transfer system that fully recognizes the value of qualifications offered by the National Open College Network. (MN)

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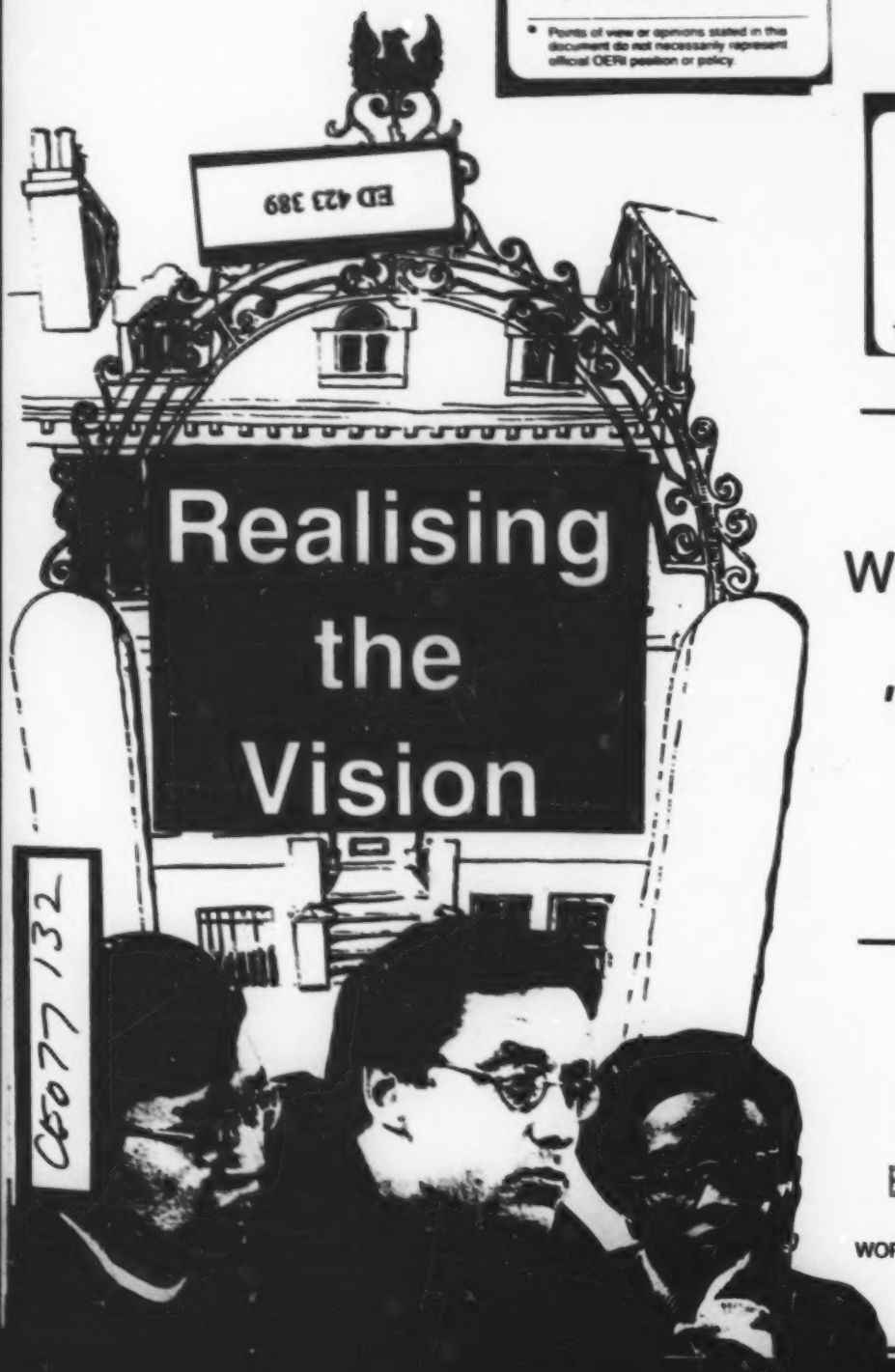

Second WEA Submission to *'The Learning Age'* Consultation

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REALISING THE VISION

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Numerical references in the text, unless otherwise stated, refer to specific paragraphs of 'The Learning Age'.

PREFACE

This document represents the WEA's second and final submission to the consultation exercise launched through the publication of *The Learning Age: A Renaissance for a new Britain.*

In April 1998, the WEA's first submission, *Bringing Down the Barriers*, was submitted to the Department for Education and Employment and made available widely to institutions, agencies and individuals who have an interest in lifelong learning. *Bringing Down the Barriers* focused on the ways by which the most disadvantaged in our society could be supported and encouraged to participate fully in the Learning Age.

This second submission, *Realising the Vision* addresses in full the many themes, proposals, and issues contained within the Government's Consultation Paper. It does so within the context of the WEA's commitment to working with all who share that common project of realising the Learning Age.

As a further contribution to the consultation exercise, the WEA has organised two public conferences in 1998, both designed to encourage discussion of major components of the lifelong learning agenda. The first, in March 1998, on *Learning Partnerships*, was organised in association with the National Open College Network (NOCN) and Leeds TEC. The second, in June 1998, on *Building the National Grid for Learning: Access for Adult Learners* was arranged in co-operation with Manchester Metropolitan University and the National Institute for Adult Continuing Education (NIACE).

Reports of both conferences have been published and are available from the WEA, free of charge, as are further copies of the WEA's two submissions.

INTRODUCTION

The WEA fully shares the exciting vision of a culture of lifelong learning set out in *The Learning Age*. Indeed, it is the kind of vision which has inspired the WEA since its foundation. With its roots in the self-improvement and radical traditions of the nineteenth century, the WEA has long campaigned for a more equal and inclusive society in which individuals can achieve their full potential for the benefit of themselves and society as a whole.

As the Consultation Paper so effectively demonstrates, this is a vision which has equal relevance today. But equally it recognises - as does the WEA - that the context in which we seek to realise that vision has dramatically changed. We have to compete in a global market if living standards are to be maintained. We have to take full advantage of new technologies and approaches to learning. We have to recognise that learning has to become a means for unifying rather than exacerbating divisions in society. We have to understand that learning needs to be taken to the learner in new and innovative ways if it is to become inclusive and capable of dismantling the barriers which stand in the way of wider participation.

The Secretary of State has argued that learning has a contribution to our society beyond securing our economic future:

"Learning enables people to play a full part in their community. It strengthens the family, the community and consequently the nation. It helps us fulfil our potential and opens doors to a love of music, art and literature." (*Foreword*)

The Consultation Paper recognises also that learning takes many forms and is undertaken in numerous locations:

"We learn in many different ways through formal study, reading, watching television, going on a training course, taking an evening class, at work, and from family and friends." (8)

The WEA's ethos is centred on responding to people's desire for these varied forms of learning. The WEA believes that value is added to their lives through participation in learning and that such activity is an end in itself. Again, as the Secretary of State has asserted, it is important to "value learning for its own sake as well as for the equality of opportunity it brings". (*Foreword*)

It is only through support and promotion of all such forms of learning that the challenge of developing the Learning Age can be met.

Building especially on our long-established links with trade unions, the WEA is taking learning to the workplace, providing new opportunities for some of the seven million adults who have no formal qualifications at all. So, for example, when many of the Return to Learn students on the WEA/UNISON programme receive their credit certificates it is the first formal recognition of learning they have had in their lives. Not surprisingly these are joyous occasions at which often the whole family turns up to celebrate.

Building on our links with a wide range of local community organisations throughout Britain, the WEA is taking learning to the learners in the communities in which they live. Focusing on the groups least likely to participate in learning, the WEA is able to demonstrate the ways in which imaginative and sensitive approaches to the provision of learning opportunities can benefit the many rather than the few.

The success of the WEA's approach to workplace, family and community learning is a demonstration of what needs to be achieved on a much larger scale if the exciting vision contained within *The Learning Age* is to be realised.

As *Learning Works*, the report of the Widening Participation Committee recognised, it is not so much a question of inventing new solutions, but rather providing the scope to build on the many initiatives which already exist and breaking down the institutional conservatism and compartmentalisation which too often stifle initiative and creativity in education.

In this respect the WEA welcomes the establishment of the University for Industry, Individual Learning Accounts, and the National Grid for Learning, all of which should facilitate innovation and flexibility in workplace learning and have the capacity to stimulate lifelong learning generally.

Likewise the WEA is pleased to see an acknowledgement of the work of the WEA and other voluntary bodies (4.19) in promoting community learning. We would hope that in due course learning at home and in the community may also be an area in which a major initiative to complement the UfI's proposed initial focus might be launched.

Above all, the WEA believes that the key issues of the lifelong learning agenda are not mutually exclusive but interdependent. Building a competitive economy, promoting social cohesion and providing for personal development and self-improvement must be seen as of equal importance. Any narrow focus on one at the expense of the other will mean that the comprehensive vision of the Learning Age will not be realised.

The Government can justifiably be pleased that the Consultation Paper has already provoked such a positive response. Rarely have those working in the field of lifelong learning been so inspired by a Government consultation exercise. The Government can now respond equally positively to this renewed enthusiasm and energy. Practical policies and effective support must now follow for the vision to be realised.

'Realising the Vision'

Summary of Key Recommendations

in response to 'The Learning Age' Consultation

1 The Individual Learning Revolution

The Government should:

- Support and encourage the participation and contribution of voluntary sector and community-based organisations in the service provision of the University for Industry.
- Secure the representation of adult learning providers on the planning and management bodies of the National Grid for Learning.
- Promote and support adult learner access to the National Grid for Learning.
- Ensure that the adult learning provision of voluntary and community-based organisations is made available to Learning Direct callers.

2 Investing in Learning

The Government should:

- Bring about a shift in public investment in learning, including strengthening the funding base for community and related provision for adult learners, which recognises the centrality of further and adult education in the provision of lifelong learning opportunities.
- Introduce parity of treatment in public financial support between part-time and full-time learners.
- Harmonise student financial support arrangements in further and higher education by the year 2002.
- End the discrimination against older learners operating in current public funding practices.
- Develop arrangements for the pooling of Individual Learning Accounts so that Group Learning Accounts can be created.
- Give early consideration to the piloting of an Adult Learning Entitlement of 5 days per year on a targeted and cost-limited basis.

3 Learning at Work

The Government should:

- Ensure that the value of learning for personal development is recognised in the expansion of learning provision at the enterprise and workplace levels.
- Support the role and contribution of trade unions in the development of workplace learning.
- Issue a 'Code of Good Practice in Workplace Learning', designed to encourage the development of Workplace Learning Policy Statements, the introduction of Workplace Learning Forums, and the agreement of Workplace Learning Compacts.

- Monitor the level and direction of employer investment in training, giving special attention to the training opportunities provided for those with limited formal levels of qualifications.

4 Realising the Learning Age

The Government should:

- Require the educational guidance and careers services and the University for Industry to develop appropriate advice, guidance and support systems to meet the particular needs of adult learners.

- Ensure that provision which aims to prepare learners for entry to courses recognised under Schedule 2d of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992 is funded by the Further Education Funding Council.

- Ensure that resources designated to promote widening participation are allocated primarily on the grounds of learners' previous educational achievement.

- Ensure that a balance of learning opportunities between key skills provision and broader adult learning opportunities in the community is made available through the Adult and Community Learning Fund.

- Introduce a 'Code of Practice' for the development of partnerships at all levels and establish arrangements whereby the effectiveness of partnerships is monitored.

5 Ensuring Standards, Quality and Accountability

The Government should:

- Establish direct funding arrangements for the training of part-time and full-time teachers of adults and for volunteers who provide support for adult learners.

- Require NETTS to recognise fully all levels and stages of achievement, types of participation and areas of involvement in lifelong learning, and to ensure that targets are developed at regional, sub-regional and sectoral levels.

- Commission comparative research designed to identify the benefits and added value to individuals and to society of all forms of post-compulsory education and training.

- Establish a common inspection framework within which the duties of OFSTED, FEFCI, HEQAA and the Training Inspectorate are performed.

6 Recognising Achievement

The Government should:

- Develop a credit accumulation and transfer system alongside the National Credit Framework, which recognises fully the value of qualifications offered by the National Open College Network.

- Support and encourage initiatives that aim to develop mechanisms by which learning achievements beyond formal qualifications can be valued.

1:THE INDIVIDUAL LEARNING REVOLUTION

In its first submission to the *Learning Age* consultation, the WEA applauded the Government's acknowledgement that a transformation of culture would be required to achieve the Paper's ambition and committed itself to join in common purpose with all who shared that vision. Necessarily then, a key task for Government and for all institutions and agencies, whether in the statutory or non-statutory sectors, is to ensure that their policies and practices, in their design and implementation, recognise that the obstacles to learning - physical, economic, social, psychological - must be honestly addressed and overcome if the Learning Age is to be realised.

It is for this reason that the WEA's first submission focused specifically on this key issue, of *Bringing Down the Barriers* to learning. The WEA argued that:

"Some barriers to participation can be overcome with relative ease, others will require substantial commitment against clearly defined targets and may have important implications for the allocation and deployment of resources" (op. cit. p.5).

The WEA demonstrated that through its practices much success could be claimed in meeting the learning needs of those who, for whatever reason, have fared least well from education and training opportunities in the past. The WEA continues to seek improvement in services to learners, and to share its experiences - the successes and the failures - with others across all institutional boundaries.

What the WEA acknowledges is that the Learning Age will present both challenges and opportunities to all learning institutions as they come to terms with that cultural shift which puts the learner and not the institution at the heart of the Individual Learning Revolution.

The University for Industry

It is the establishment of the University for Industry which encapsulates so many of these challenges and opportunities. The WEA supports its creation and recognises that over time it has the capacity to reconfigure the ways in which lifelong learning is perceived by 'users' and 'suppliers' alike. The principal functions of the Ufl, as detailed in the *Pathfinder Prospectus*, are recognised by the WEA as providing an appropriate framework within which the initiative can be built. Likewise, the WEA appreciates and supports the decision that the initial focus on priority target areas should embrace key aspects of workplace learning, particularly as they relate to small and medium size enterprises and specific industry and service sectors.

For the Ufl to have comprehensive purchase on lifelong learning, it must ensure that, over time, it remains faithful to its original design which anticipated a major contribution to learning in the community and in the home, as well as in the workplace. In the shorter term, those who are charged with overseeing the formative stages of development need to be sensitive to the very real dangers that could arise if the institutional partners are exclusively drawn from those who are 'technology and capital rich', be they in the public or private domain. The WEA believes strongly that the Ufl has an obligation to encourage the active participation and contribution of the many voluntary sector and community-based organisations which formally and informally provide the learning environment which, in the Secretary of State's words, "helps make ours a civilised society, develops the spiritual side of our lives and promotes active citizenship". (*Foreword*)

Learning Direct

The WEA welcomes the decision that Learning Direct will become the information and advice service for the the Ufl once it is is fully operational. A free-call telephone advice and

information facility has huge potential to meet the immediate requirements of those new to adult learning in helping them to identify appropriate learning opportunities available locally. It is important that its advice is both impartial and confidential. It is critical that the data upon which assistance is offered is both up-to-date and truly comprehensive. Currently not all providers of lifelong learning opportunities are able to transmit electronically their data directly or indirectly to Learning Direct. If Learning Direct is to provide a comprehensive service, which can refer callers to local advice services, adult education and private providers, as well as to further and higher education institutions, then short-term arrangements must be put in place for the receipt of non-electronically transmitted data.

Technology and Learning

The WEA shares the positive vision, permeating *The Learning Age*, of information and communications technologies transforming the landscape of lifelong learning. If applied with sensitivity and imagination, technology offers powerful new tools for the creation of a truly inclusive and high quality lifelong learning culture.

In planning and assessing the application of technologies, the WEA believes that there are some essential criteria to be placed at the centre of decision-making. These must ensure that the technologies are the servants of lifelong learning, not the master. More specifically, technology strategies must:

- Enhance the experience of learning: Correct technological choices must be made to ensure that the quality of the learning experience is improved demonstrably.

- Reach new learners and stimulate demand: Technologies have the capacity to be both socially inclusive and exclusive. Technology strategies which further exacerbate social exclusion - for example, through the creation of inaccessible islands of technology - must be strongly resisted.

- Establish new learning pathways: As distinctions between home, workplace, community, and formal learning environments become blurred as sites of learning, there are truly radical opportunities for the creation of a seamless fabric of learning provision, with countless locations, entry and exit points.

- Provide technology training: Whilst the numbers of adults with access to the technologies continues to increase, there is still a large proportion of adult learners (or potential learners) who are unlikely to gain access without measures specifically designed to assist them. This includes the provision of basic technology training and support, along with fully accessible local learning centres.

The WEA is convinced that a learner-centred approach to technology and learning, which harnesses the best of participatory and collaborative traditions in adult learning with broadcasting and communications technologies, will help realise the vision of the Learning Age. There are now numerous examples of how this might be achieved - even with minimum technical sophistication. Some of the most exciting developments made possible by technological change are:

- Partnerships between broadcasters, educators and learners: The role of broadcasting in stimulating demand for learning is well known. The BBC 'Computers Don't Bite' initiative proved yet again that there is mass demand for learning, stimulated through TV. New technologies, particularly the introduction of digital TV

broadcasting, offer extraordinary opportunities for creative partnerships between broadcasters, those offering guidance and advice (linked to Learning Direct), adult educators and learners themselves. Much of the potential however, depends on continuing Government action to ensure that public broadcasting maintains its strong commitment to high quality educational programming.

- Partnerships with libraries: The WEA strongly supports a dynamic role for libraries. For many thousands of adults, the first point of reference in learning is the public library service - whether for advice, guidance or self-study. This role is rapidly developing with the introduction of public online access from many public libraries. There is tremendous opportunity for libraries to play an essential role in the creation of local lifelong learning communities - linking individual learners, voluntary organisations, educational institutions and local access centres. Many local access centres, of course, may be located within libraries.

- Collaborative distance learning: Across most curriculum areas - from local history, to languages, to basic skills - an intelligent application of internet technologies is beginning to enable adult learners to develop new techniques in collaborative distance learning, enjoining local class to local class or learner to learner. Courses can be organised across many sites simultaneously with each retaining the important group-based discussions and face-to-face meetings, but enhancing the process by sharing ideas, thoughts and discussions across cities, regions, or the country as a whole.

- Collaborative curriculum development: Relatively simple technologies can also support collaboration in course development, enabling teachers to share ideas, course outlines and education materials. For an organisation such as the WEA, this is of particular value. The WEA relies on several thousand part-time tutors, mostly home-based, and often teaching in very isolated sites. Technology-mediated collaborative course development ensures far greater skill-sharing, spread of good practice, and quality assurance.

- Learning at home, the community and the workplace: The potential is there already for lifelong learning to be delivered in a patchwork of complementary settings, woven together into a coherent shape through the mediation of technology. For the individual adult learner this should be a seamless continuum of provision, with easy progression routes, both vertical and horizontal, across institutions and sectors.

- The global curriculum: The technologies offer important opportunities for learning in an international context. New international markets are opened for UK learning institutions through distance learning and technology-mediated partnership arrangements. The technology enables transnational collaborative learning - a field in which the WEA has developed considerable expertise - both as a means of introducing high-quality international perspectives in the domestic curriculum, and enabling UK adult learners to take part in global learning programmes. There is considerable potential here for productive collaboration between DfEE, DfID and agencies such as the WEA.

National Grid for Learning

The WEA welcomes and supports the proposed establishment of the National Grid for Learning and believes that its impact on lifelong learning could be enhanced dramatically if the following issues are addressed:

- Adult learners should be given full and comprehensive access to the National Grid for Learning at the earliest possible opportunity. Whilst applauding the initiative in general, a serious commitment to lifelong learning requires that access to the Grid is not restricted to schools.

- Adult learning providers should be represented on all planning and management bodies for the National Grid for Learning to ensure that its design and structure are not exclusively based on the needs of schools, thereby precluding the future participation of adult learners.

- There are significant opportunities for private sector investment and market development in lifelong learning. The Government should ensure that the regulatory framework around the National Grid for Learning includes sufficient safeguards to ensure that it remains inclusive, and targeted at those facing greatest educational and economic disadvantage. Particular care should be exercised to ensure that copyright and licensing arrangements, whilst protecting the interests of content producers, do not lead to high and discriminatory tariff barriers for adult learners. This is especially true in the protection of public service obligations of broadcasters in the advent of digital services.

- Support and training is required if the quality of technology-enhanced learning available through the National Grid for Learning is to be of a sufficiently high standard. The WEA welcomes the role of the UfI in encouraging the development of learning products where there are market failures and weaknesses in provision. However, considerable investment is required to improve the methodological and technical skills of adult educators, if they are to take advantage of its commissioning function.

- The National Grid for Learning should offer full access to adult learners and educators outside formal institutional settings. This is of concern to the WEA and other voluntary and community-based organisations where the great majority of teaching staff are part-time and work from home, and where classes and course meetings are held in a wide variety of community settings. Technical solutions requiring very high band-width, for example, would fatally discriminate against all but major institutional providers. The WEA recognises that this could change in the long-term with sufficient investment and revised regulatory frameworks in telecommunications.

- Wherever possible, employers should be encouraged to provide access at the workplace to the National Grid for Learning. This could be through 'web to desk' arrangements for all employees, or through the provision of learning resource centres in space set aside within the workplace. Employers and trade unions should be encouraged to agree access through appropriate consultation or bargaining arrangements.

Local Access Centres

The WEA believes that adequately resourced Local Access Centres in the community, particularly in those urban and rural areas facing greatest educational disadvantage, should be a high priority. There is an urgent need to establish national co-ordination between Government departments and agencies to avoid duplication of effort and resources. Local Access Centres should be focused on access to learning, made possible by the introduction of technology, rather than access to the technology itself.

Attention should be given also to ensuring that Local Access Centres have appropriate and adequate staffing support to meet the needs of users.

The WEA recognises that organisations in the voluntary sector have the potential to play a key role in the development of access centres in the community that are responsive to local need, engage local experience and imagination in design and management of provision, and foster a sense of community ownership and self-management. Provision should be flexible and diverse, but based around agreed and kite-marked quality standards.

2: INVESTING IN LEARNING

The WEA welcomes the opportunity provided by the Consultation Paper to address the basic principles for public funding of lifelong learning, and endorses the view that:

- Investment in learning should be a shared responsibility where individuals, employers and the state contribute.
- Public support should be targeted at those adults in greatest financial need.
- Public support for learners should aim to:
  - bring back into learning those whose formal education did not extend beyond school
  - widen access for those who are most disadvantaged
  - enable individuals to choose the method of learning which suits them best.

The WEA welcomes the announcement of a number of funding initiatives as valuable practical expression of how these principles can be developed:

- Employee Education Development Fund
- Adult and Community Learning Fund
- University for Industry Learning Centres
- Basic Skills Innovation and Summer Schools Funds
- Individual Learning Accounts

In the longer term it is the WEA's contention that the application of these broad principles presents a series of major challenges, most especially for Government:

- How to maximise leverage from public investment.
- How to stimulate employer investment in training for all employees in all sectors of the economy.
- How to encourage increased individual investment.
- How to create a regulatory and funding regime where institutional providers are responsive to the needs of lifelong learners, particularly those who traditionally have not participated in post-school learning.

Public Investment

Within an environment of limited public resources, it is clear to the WEA that mass participation in lifelong learning will only be achieved with a progressive shift in emphasis in public investment:

- From higher level to entry-level in further education.
- From public funding of research to teaching, and from full degree work to studies leading to partial credit and higher diplomas, in higher education.
- From higher education to further education.
- Which strengthens the funding base for community and related provision for adult learners.

The WEA remains concerned that further education, in comparison to other parts of the public education service, has been underfunded in recent years, a view supported by the House of Commons Select Committee on Education and Employment (Sixth Report). Furthermore, research for the FEFC Widening Participation Committee confirms the disparity in student support available to further education compared to full-time students in higher education. Evidence confirms also that the overwhelming majority of working class participants in post-school education use further education institutions and not higher education institutions. The WEA believes that for the Government to achieve "greater consistency so that different providers get a similar balance of funding from the public purse, individuals and employers" (2.6), then such disparities must be addressed.

The WEA believes that the heart of the Learning Age for the majority of people will be an approach to learning where episodes of study are undertaken part-time and complementary to the challenges and priorities of adult life. For the WEA it follows therefore that institutional funding and individual learner support needs to be 'mode free' and based on consistent principles applied across sectoral divisions. Most critically, the WEA would argue that part-time learners need parity of treatment with full-time learners. Parity of treatment in financial support for learners could be achieved within the lifetime of one Parliament; moves to harmonise student support in further and higher education could be introduced by the year 2002.

It is evident that Britain is an ageing society with significant changes in the pattern of working lives and in participation in education and training, and emerging sharp differences in the economic well-being of older adults. The Learning Age must be sensitive and responsive to the learning needs of the old as well as the young and ensure that discrimination against older learners, operating in current public funding practices, is overcome. It is to be regretted therefore, that the Consultation Paper does not consider it appropriate to

make income-contingent loans available to those over the age of 50 who do not plan to re-enter the labour market.

Individual Learning Accounts

The introduction of Individual Learning Accounts is an exciting proposal and one which is welcomed warmly by the WEA. Such a national system, financed through a partnership of individual commitment, employer support and public support, could have a vital role in attracting those who are the most educationally disadvantaged in society. In the early stages of delivery, it is appropriate that learning accounts should be targeted at those without qualifications and in low skill jobs, and those seeking to return to work. The WEA endorses the Consultation Paper's view that:

"Learning accounts will need to be part of a coherent approach to welfare reform, in which relieving poverty is not just a question of financial support but also of enabling people to get the skills which allow them to earn their own living" (2.17).

The Consultation Paper is right to emphasise that flexibility of use is essential. It is important also to recognise that those targeted for learning accounts should have the facility, free of charge, of impartial and independent guidance and support in making informed learning choices. The confidence to take up a learning account should not be assumed, and at both workplace and community levels, willingness to participate would be improved dramatically if Individual Learning Accounts could be 'pooled' into Group Learning Accounts thereby allowing collective participation in learning programmes which meet both group and individual learning needs.

The WEA welcomes the proposal that learning accounts can be used to help meet the costs of childcare.
In the longer term, the WEA views the introduction of Individual Learning Accounts as, in part, offering a first transitional stage towards an adult learning entitlement. The WEA continues to be commited to the establishment of a universal adult learning entitlement as an essential building block in the creation of the Learning Society. As a next stage in that process, it believes the Government should explore the possibility of piloting an adult learning entitlement of five days' learning a year, available on a targeted basis and within a cost-limited budget.

There are two crucial elements which the WEA recognises in persuading adults of the relevance of learning to their lives:

- The first steps back can be into an enormous range of possible provision, and the traditional vocational/non-vocational divide simply has no significance.

- The motivation will often be individual or group issue-defining and problem-solving.

An adult learning entitlement must therefore promote an entirely open approach to the definition of 'provision', if it is to be effective. Otherwise, it might intensify, rather than reduce, exclusion.

3: LEARNING AT WORK

The WEA agrees that if the Learning Age is to be realised a transformation will be required in workplace learning. Amongst the measures proposed, the WEA welcomes especially:

- The creation of an Employee Education Development Fund to encourage innovative projects in workplace learning.
- The remit of the University for Industry to include a particular focus on learning in small and medium size enterprises.
- The additional support to expand basic skills training and the establishment of a working group to advise on effective post-school basic skills provision.
- The additional support to allow for the expansion of Modern Apprenticeships.

The WEA is heartened by the Consultation Paper's recognition that:

"Learning is a natural issue for partnership in the workplace between employers, employees and their trade unions" (3.10).

It endorses the view of the Consultation Paper that:

"This joint activity, focusing on practical issues such as time off for learning, employer support for individual learning accounts, and training plans for staff, signals a new and modern role for unions" (3.10).

Indeed, it is the WEA's view that the key to a transformation in workplace learning lies in the creation of effective workplace partnerships between the social partners. Their mutual recognition that workplace learning should include a wide variety of learning, as the Fryer Report argued, would be a further contribution to the process of transformation. The WEA believes that three broad categories of learning each deserve and require supporting:

- Task specific or job-related learning: Designed to improve the competence, efficiency and productivity of the workforce within their current occupations.
- Parallel and transferable skills learning: Designed to create a more flexible workforce responsive to the changing nature, or short term staffing needs of a particular employer.
- Personal development learning: Designed to create opportunities for personal fulfilment and to provide the knowledge, skills and competence necessary to enable individuals to make employment and career changes not limited to progression within their present employment.

Employee Development

Without undervaluing in any way the importance of training in specific and transferable skills, the WEA's primary concern, as a provider of workplace learning, is in expanding the opportunities made available for personal employee development.

It is the WEA's view that personal employee development contributes directly to enhancing learning undertaken across the full range of vocational programmes.

The WEA's experience of the expanding area of employee development has been wholly positive and has led to the identification of a number of positive outcomes for individual learners and the social partners, which include:

- Wider recognition for the value of more liberal and personal development strands within employee workplace learning.

- The importance of targeting low-paid, low status employees and, where this has been done, thereby establishing considerable latent demand for learning amongst these groups.

- Encouraging unions to become involved in securing a wider range of educational opportunities for their members.

- Sustaining the idea of the workplace as a site for learning.

The Consultation Paper offers as an example of workplace partnership in action the UNISON Return to Learn programme (inset, p.36), a programme which has been designed and delivered through a National Partnership Agreement between UNISON and the WEA. Importantly, it has been developed as a trade union initiative in an employee development context, with around one-hundred public service employers supporting the scheme. Amongst its key strengths, identified by UNISON and the WEA, are:

- It is a flexible and responsive scheme.

- It allows individuals to learn for their own personal development within a collective framework.

- There are strong learning links with the real social and economic circumstances of individual learners.

- There is a strong national profile and an ability to deliver nationally a quality assured programme.

It is encouraging for the advocates of enhanced workplace learning opportunities to note that the Government's commitment to the University for Industry, to the introduction of Individual Learning Accounts, the creation of an Employee Education Fund, and, importantly, to the 'widening participation' agenda, provide a public policy framework within which employee development can continue to grow.

The WEA, in association with other providers, will play its full part in this process by ensuring that its support for, and involvement in, employee development schemes embraces:

- A broad educational approach that spans vocational/non-vocational boundaries.

- Targeting of disadvantaged groups.

- Encouraging and creating structures for progression and consolidation.

- Employee and trade union involvement in design and delivery.

- The inclusion of an element of paid-release to study.

Workplace Partnerships

The WEA recognises that the capacity of trade unions to support fully the transformation of workplace learning will depend not least on the extent to which social partnership is encouraged and supported by Government actions.

Trade union advocacy for the 'learning revolution' is indispensable for the transformation of workplace learning. At enterprise level the active participation of trade union workplace representatives could help stimulate the motivation to learn amongst employees and, critically, provide a supportive collective framework for workplace learning in the eyes of trade union members. The TUC's *Bargaining for Skills* programme has demonstrated already how vital trade union support can be to the development of skills training at enterprise level.

No better stimulus could be offered now than the formal recognition by the Government that Learning Partnerships between trade unions and employers will need the support of an appropriate framework, preferably through a 'Code of Good Practice in Workplace Learning'.

The WEA supports the view of the Fryer Report that such a Code could provide guidance on the preparation by employers of Workplace Learning Policy Statements, promote the establishment of joint Workplace Learning Forums, and support the conclusion of Workplace Learning Compacts between employers and trade unions.

Such a framework would have the additional advantage of providing an important workplace context for two major Government lifelong learning initiatives, the UfI and ILAs. For the UfI, these arrangements could provide a locus for the identification of learning needs and analysis of whether such needs can be satisfied by provision currently available. These arrangements could allow ILAs to be opened and accessed by groups of employees, as well as individuals, thereby offering the type of flexibility which ILAs must have if they are to stimulate learning commitment amongst individuals.

Employer Investment

The WEA supports the Consultation Paper's view that:

"Equipping people with the right knowledge and skills will be crucial to maintaining high and sustainable levels of employment" (3.1).

While recognising that there is much good practice in employer-provided workplace learning, it remains a concern that in general terms, as the Consultation Paper notes, "investment (in training) is unevenly spread and variable in quality" (3.2). The tendency is strong for those in employment who are already advantaged through good education qualifications to receive further employer-provided training and career support. This must be compared to those employees, who have been initially disadvantaged through poor formal educational attainment and who perform low status jobs with limited or negligible training opportunities.

The WEA recognises that the Government is committed to securing increased employer investment in lifelong learning through voluntary means alone. Within this context the WEA believes that actions can be taken which would encourage employers to give special attention to the training needs of those who traditionally have benefitted least from training opportunities. Comment has been made already on the importance of the UfI focus on small and medium size enterprises where training opportunities are often poor. In addition, the WEA welcomes the statement that TECs will focus on small and medium size enterprises in their workforce development plans, and offers to cooperate with TECs and providers in developing a comprehensive range of workplace learning programmes, including those delivered through Local Access Centres.

The WEA believes that the effective monitoring of the level and direction of employer investment in training is of vital importance. It is especially concerned that monitoring processes should incorporate the facility to record employer investment which is targeted specifically at the training needs of those whose formal level of qualifications is below NVQ Level 3.

The Consultation Paper recognises the value of targets as "a focus for action and a benchmark for progress" (3.5). Accordingly, national training targets must be dis-aggregated to sectoral, regional and local levels if they are to have effective purchase on employer investment in training. The extent to which targets for employer-provided training are met within an appropriate time scale should determine the Government's view on whether or not a voluntary framework should continue to attract its support.

4: REALISING THE LEARNING AGE

For too long the educational system has tolerated patterns of participation that contribute to a learning divide within the population. The virtuous circle of those who have benefited from learning whether economically, socially or culturally, then demanding and receiving more learning, is set against a cycle of non-participation, under-achievement and disaffection for those who 'failed' at education the first time round. This situation was succinctly summarised by *Learning Works*, the report of the Widening Participation Committee in terms of: 'If at first you don't succeed. . . . you don't succeed'.

Changing this demoralising and debilitating approach will require fundamental shifts in attitudes and approaches from employers, learning providers, national, regional and sub-regional government and learners themselves.

The WEA believes that the following approaches will begin to overcomes the learning divide and thereby contribute to the realisation of the Learning Age:

- Recognising the centrality of educational advice, guidance and support for those beyond compulsory school age.
- Supporting initiatives that widen participation in learning by those who traditionally have been non-participants.
- Taking learning to the people and ensuring it adds value to their daily lives.
- Recognising the importance of group as well as individual participation in learning.

Advice, Guidance and Support

The WEA welcomes the Consultation Paper's recognition of the dynamic role that educational guidance and careers services have in informing potential and current learners of the opportunities available to them. The WEA endorses the Paper's view of the need for staff development within the further education sector on the issues of guidance. For many learners the tutor is the person to whom they turn first for information on how best to continue their learning and to what opportunities it may lead. This front line source of advice and guidance requires support and development if tutors are to respond effectively to requests for advice as well as acting as efficient referral agents.

Accordingly, the WEA urges the Government to develop an effective multi-agency, free entry framework for the delivery of initial educational guidance in both the statutory and non-statutory sectors which embraces lifelong learning.

The WEA welcomes the proposed increased investment in the Careers Service. As the nature and shape of work changes the need for a universal entitlement to high quality careers guidance and support is as essential for adults as it is for school leavers. The Careers Service and UfI must be given the capacity to counsel and advise those uncertain about which opportunities to pursue.

Widening Participation

The need to widen participation in adult learning is irresistible. Over recent years great strides have been made to encourage participation from groups who traditionally have chosen not to take part in learning beyond school age. Further Education Colleges, adult, residential and community learning providers are rightly praised as being:

'the key to breaking the vicious circle of poor economic performance and an inadequate standard of living', (4.14)

The Further Education Funding Council has responded positively to the challenge of widening participation. However the system by which new resources are to be targeted through postcodes is imperfect. The Government is urged to work with the Council to develop a more effective and appropriate mechanism for the distribution of resources to sustain the widening participation agenda. The primary focus should be on the identification of levels of past educational achievement.

The Consultation Paper has recognised that participation in high quality, organised learning is a valuable end in itself. For many adult learners the decision to return to study requires them to overcome negative memories of compulsory education. Their enthusiasm to exorcise such ghosts should not be compromised by requiring them to follow only certain approved curriculum areas. The WEA's experience shows that crossing the threshold of returning to study, in whatever form the learner considers appropriate, raises confidence and encourages a move to further academic or vocational study.

It would be appropriate therefore for the Government to seek from the Further Education Funding Council further review of the recurrent funding methodology. In particular, provision that encourages participation which aims to prepare learners for entry to courses funded under Schedule 2d of the Further and Higher Act 1992 should qualify for Council funding.

The WEA welcomes the attention given by the Tomlinson Committee to educational provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The vision of inclusive learning propounded in the Committee's Report rightly places the onus on providers to ensure that their institutions, curricula and structures encourage participation by all who wish to learn. Only through the provision of adequate resources to support the individual needs of learners can each member of society be able to participate in the 'learning revolution'. The WEA's first submission to the Learning Age consultation, 'Bringing Down the Barriers', demonstrated ways by which obstacles to participation can be overcome.

Partnerships

Partnerships of statutory and non-statutory bodies, providers across all sectors, funders and accrediting bodies have the potential to meet the needs of adult learners. The WEA's experience of collaborative working shows that to be truly effective, partnerships must embrace and value the skills and experiences that each partner can offer.

As the practice and promotion of partnerships becomes more widespread, particular attention must be paid to enable the participation of smaller organisations on as equal a basis as possible.

The Government is urged to develop a Code of Practice which provides a framework for the development of partnerships at all levels. The Code should emphasise that the primary focus of the partnership must be to meet the needs of learners and should also establish arrangements whereby the effectiveness of the partnership is monitored.

Community Learning

The WEA welcomes the recognition given in the Consultation Paper to the contribution it makes to the development and promotion of community-based learning. The WEA has always been committed to the provision of learning which builds from the learners' community and gives proper emphasis to the collective capacity building nature of learning itself.

For a variety of reasons many potential learners are unable to access learning in traditional institutions, whether through disability, geographic isolation or other

barriers. Overcoming these problems requires innovative and often resource intensive solutions which take the learning to the learners. The Government should support, in terms of advocacy and resources, provision which offers accessible learning to meet the needs of individual communities.

The proposed Adult and Community Learning Fund is welcomed as a means to support and develop imaginative schemes that widen access to adult education. The Government should ensure that in the administration of the fund an appropriate balance of priorities is found. Whilst it is important that adults are given the opportunity to update and upgrade their key skills, sufficient emphasis must be given to projects which address the range of adult learners' needs and motivation to learn, especially in community settings.

The Government should recognise that many of the charities and trusts it wishes to see as partners within this initiative may well only be able to contribute expertise, skills and enthusiasm to projects rather than financial resources. Inappropriate match funding and other criteria would run the risk of excluding from the initiative many of the voluntary and community organisations best placed to develop effective and appropriate provision.

The WEA supports the Consultation Paper's view that facilities within communities such as libraries and museums should be used to offer accessible learning opportunities. The role of these local resources is vital if learning is to be viewed as integral to people's daily lives. These facilities will become increasingly important as the UfI and other initiatives become established parts of the learning environment. Investigation into practical ways in which provision can be enhanced through co-operation with museums and galleries is currently a development priority for the WEA.

The Government should actively encourage schools to recognise the role they can play as a focus of community activity. If the Learning Age is to be realised then facilities within schools must be used appropriately to benefit the local community. This should include the requirement upon schools to offer appropriate access to their IT equipment to ensure that adults can participate in, and benefit from, the technological revolution being envisaged by the National Grid for Learning.

The WEA has considerable experience in developing provision that builds upon and reinforces schools' capacity to encourage participation in learning. These include supporting voluntary class helpers and governors, personal development courses for parents, and family literacy and numeracy programmes.

The WEA also offers a range of courses that aim to increase and support learners' activity within their local community. These include capacity building programmes, promotion of advocacy skills and increasing understanding of their position in the global community. Such provision recognises the social value of voluntarism: for many people the return to learning is also a return to voluntary activity in the wider sense.

5: ENSURING STANDARDS, QUALITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

All providers of learning opportunities, whether statutory or non-statutory institutions or agencies, should commit themselves continuously to improving the quality of the service they offer to learners. The Consultation Paper rightly emphasises the primacy of meeting learners' needs as the test of a provider's performance. The WEA agrees with the Consultation Paper that, in addition, providers must concern themselves with:

- Providing high quality teaching.
- Setting, publishing and meeting targets for improving achievement.
- Identifying and dealing with weaknesses.
- Having objective external assessment.
- Ensuring that they provide good value for money.

Training

The WEA applauds the Government's aim that all new teachers in further education should hold, or within two years of appointment have begun, a recognised initial teacher training qualification. The WEA recognises that teaching staff in further, higher and adult education represent a major resource in achieving the Learning Age. Accordingly, staff development and training has to attract high priority within institutions. Whatever the skills required - and at the very least, staff will need training in new ways of working, in widening participation and in the application of information and communication technologies - they will be as necessary for part-time staff as full-time staff.

The Consultation Paper notes that a National Training Organisation (NTO) will be established for further education in the near future with the remit to set appropriate sectoral standards for training and staff development. The WEA welcomes this decision and anticipates that the establishment of the NTO for Lifelong Education, Action and Development (covering the four occupational areas of Adult Education, Community Education, Community Work and Youth Work) will be agreed shortly.

The training and staff development needs of the Adult Learning sector will differ from further education, largely for two reasons:

- The overwhelming dependency of the sector on part-time teachers.
- The active participation of volunteers whose unpaid commitment to the work of the sector is vital to its further development.

Staff and volunteers in the multitude of voluntary and community-based organisations will play a decisive role in building the Learning Age. In the WEA's view this is the strongest of arguments in favour of the Government establishing direct funding arrangements for the training of teachers of adults, full-time and part-time, as well as volunteers who provide support for adult learners.

Targets and Standards

The Learning Age must be an age of high quality learning in which all providers are enjoined in seeking continuous improvement to the service they offer. Targets are an essential reference point for measuring the success or otherwise of institutional responses to learning needs. Targets in the Learning Age must reflect the variegated nature of lifelong learning, they must act as an incentive for

learners and providers, and they must attract legitimacy through a sense of common ownership. For these reasons the WEA believes it is imperative that the consultation on the National Education and Training Targets (NETTS) fully recognises the various areas of involvement in learning, the levels and stages of achievements, and the various types of participation reflected in lifelong learning.

The Fryer Report has argued that if targets are to be set and progress towards them properly monitored, then reliable comparative data is essential. Whereas there is solid data available for higher education, including rates of return on investment, no such general conclusion can be drawn for further education. The picture is more problematic for community-based adult learning. Most worrying of all is the absolute paucity of data on that broad range of learning activity which embraces capacity building in communities and includes family learning, voluntary agencies' programmes, and community group learning activities. Thus any judgement on the 'added value' which accrues to society as a whole from inter-generational learning, learning opportunities for the frail elderly, or for those recovering from mental or physical illness, cannot be validated through robust data, yet few would question its value in helping to create a sense of social cohesion.

The WEA is firmly of the view that the Government should commission comparative research aimed at identifying benefits and added value to individuals and to society as a whole in all forms of post-compulsory education and training.

Inspection

The WEA welcomes the Consultation Paper's proposal to take early action to secure the improvement and harmonisation of inspection arrangements for post-16 education and training. The value of objective external assessment of performance, allied to a vigorous self-assessment framework, cannot be overstated. Within a genuinely supportive environment, inspection and self-assessment have the capacity to sustain the systematic search for continuous improvement in the quality of service offered to learners by providers.

The WEA endorses the Fryer Report's recommendation that Government should give consideration to how the overlapping but different duties of OFSTED, the FEFCI, the HEQAA, and the new Training Inspectorate might be performed within a common inspection framework. Such an approach would provide the necessary pre-condition for all accredited and non-accredited lifelong learning provision, wherever it is delivered, to be supported by effective quality assurance.

6: RECOGNISING ACHIEVEMENT

The WEA is sensitive to the Consultation Paper's concern that all qualifications should provide evidence of educational attainment and a mechanism by which educational standards can be upheld. It should be recognised also that qualifications do have intrinsic value. As the Fryer Report has argued:

". . . most (people) look for some acknowledgement of their involvement in learning and some means by which they can be given recognition for it by others. Learners also value an indication for themselves, if nobody else, of the learning gain their efforts have brought."

To this end the WEA believes the recognition of learning achievement should:

- Be comprehensible to, and valued by the learner and other interested parties.
- Be flexible and appropriate to the learner's needs.
- Ensure the standard of learning provision.

Qualifications Reform

The WEA supports the view that the qualifications system in Britain is in need of reform. The jungle of available awards leads to confusion about the currency value and equivalence of qualifications and risks undermining learners' achievements in the eyes of employers and other interested parties. Accordingly, the formation of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority is an important initiative. By bringing together responsibility for all levels of study, from pre-school to higher level vocational education, a sense of coherence can be developed within which a culture of lifelong learning can emerge.

This single body, with responsibility for the entire range of qualifications up to degree level, deserves support in its aim of dismantling the damaging divide between academic and vocational awards. A coherent National Credit Framework would allow learners, employers, funders, and others to recognise the level and value of all qualifications. The WEA would urge that such a framework should dovetail with higher education's CATS system to facilitate a seamless transition between sectors.

The WEA endorses the view of the Consultation Paper that a credit accumulation and transfer system should be developed alongside the National Credit Framework. Unitisation of curricula into manageable and achievable segments would offer appropriate recognition to those many adults who are able to learn only at intervals over time. In such a way flexibility of study could be achieved, and wasteful repetition of delivery avoided.

However, such a system must be underpinned by robust monitoring mechanisms to record achievement. The National Record of Achievement or Progress File could provide this, supported by high quality impartial guidance and advice to learners, thus ensuring that appropriate choices are made from the range of opportunities available.

The WEA is concerned that a flexible credit accumulation and transfer system must allow for the development of accredited learning fully in tune with learners' needs. Much of the WEA's community-based provision has been accredited through local organisations, including Open College Networks. This ensures that the resulting programmes respond directly to the learners' needs. It is important that the qualifications offered by such programmes are recognised within the National Credit Framework.

The foundation for the development of a credit accumulation system and the

National Credit Framework is the recognition that certain skills underpin all learning activities and the Consultation Paper's focus on these Key Skills is welcomed. If people are truly to embrace the concept of lifelong learning they must be helped to develop the skills necessary to enable them to learn. It is essential that full recognition is given to the existing skills of learners, which may have been acquired through previous or non-formal learning, by coherent and robust mechanisms of accreditation of prior learning.

The proposal to introduce new entry level or 'starter' qualifications is welcomed as providing opportunities for accredited learning for those for whom foundation qualifications are too daunting. However, the Government and QCA should recognise that for some potential learners the prospect of any level of accredited learning acts as a barrier to returning to study. To overcome this, support should be given to initiatives that aim to develop imaginative mechanisms by which learning achievements beyond formal qualifications can be valued.

Recognition of Achievement

The Government and the QCA should acknowledge that formal accreditation is only one measure by which achievement is recognised. The WEA believes strongly that for many adult learners the requirement of formal assessment is inappropriate. Previous poor educational experiences and examination failure can turn adults away from learning for life. Initiatives to encourage their return to study are often ineffective if the learning programme is required to focus primarily on achieving qualifications.

The WEA has been at the forefront of initiatives aimed at developing good practice in recognising learners' goals and achievements in areas of provision which are not designed to lead to formal qualifications. The recent FEDA publication, *A Sense of Achievement: Outcomes of Adult Learning* (1997), recognised that such approaches are concerned with the:

"accreditation of learning in its widest sense: finding ways of identifying, recording and valuing learning which start with learners' needs."

The Learning Outcomes Strategy developed by the WEA encourages students to take greater responsibility for their own learning, placing them in a better position to confirm their learning achievements. Tutors produce syllabuses that make explicit the proposed learning outcomes of the course - what students should be able to think, do, feel or say as a result of their newly acquired knowledge and understanding. These outcomes are discussed and agreed by the class and may be modified during the course. At the end of the course, students are encouraged to reflect upon their learning and consider how best to continue their studies in the future.

The active celebration of learning is an important means by which the WEA demonstrates the added value of its students' achievements. Students are encouraged to produce publications, anthologies and newsletters, organise exhibitions and performances and become active in local and national community education initiatives.

Accordingly, the WEA endorses the Fryer Report's plea that:

"Government, other funders and providers should seek to cherish equally those many forms of learning which can clearly demonstrate high quality, achievement for learners and added value."

Affiliations

The WEA is a member organisation of:

ADSET
CEA (Council for Educational Advance)
DEA (Development Education Association)
IBT (International Broadcasting Trust)
Local Authorities Women's Network
NCVO (National Council for Voluntary Organisations)
NIACE (National Institute of Adult Continuing Education)

EU-IRIS (Women's Training Network)
IFWEA (International Federation of Workers' Education Associations)
EURO-WEA (the European Regional Organisation of IFWEA)

28 national organisations, with an interest in adult and workers' education, are affiliated to the WEA at national level:

Banking, Insurance & Finance Union
Ceramic and Allied Trades Union
Communication Managers Association
Co-operative Union Limited
Co-operative Wholesale Society Ltd
Fircroft College of Adult Education
Fire Brigades Union
General Federation of Trade Unions
GMB
Graphical Paper & Media Union
Iron & Steel Trades Confederation,
Manufacturing Science Finance
Musicians' Union
National Association of Schoolmasters, Union of Women Teachers
National Union of Insurance Workers
National Union of Journalists
National Union of Knitwear, Footwear & Apparel Trades
National Union of Marine Aviation & Shipping Transport Officers
National Union of Teachers
Pre-School Learning Alliance
Public and Commercial Services Union
Ruskin College
Society of Telecom Executives
Trades Union Congress
Transport and General Workers' Union
Transport Salaried Staffs' Association
UNISON
Union of Shop Distributive & Allied Workers

At District level, a wide range of regional and local organisations are affiliated to the WEA.

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The Workers' Educational Association exists primarily to provide adults with access to experience of organised learning which develops intellectual understanding, confidence and social and collective responsibility. Particular features of its approach to the provision of learning opportunities for adults include:

Valuing and making use of students' life experience

•

Involving students in organising provision and planning their own learning

•

Targeting students who have benefited least from the education system and from opportunities for further and higher education

•

Collaborating with other organisations and agencies to meet the needs of adult learners for educational guidance, equal access to provision, and for relevant, progressive and accredited learning opportunities

•

Offering high quality learning experiences underpinned by regular monitoring and evaluation of the programme

•

Providing staff development opportunities for professional staff and training for voluntary members

•

Promoting and supporting the voluntary movement by which the Association governs itself and decides its future strategy

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